

Before the Corn Crib — How Early Settlers and the Kickapoo Dried Their Corn

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Several months ago, I wrote a story describing how pioneer farmers in the Fairbury area harvested corn in the 1840s and stored it in small wooden corn cribs. That article explained how every ear of corn had to be picked by hand, hauled by wagon, and then shoveled into the crib to dry. Farming in those early years was extremely labor-intensive, and even a modest harvest required many long days of work.

Since publishing that story, I have learned that the earliest settlers sometimes used another method to handle their corn crop—especially during their first year or two on the prairie, before they had time to build a proper corn crib. That earlier method was known as shocking corn, and it was widely used throughout the Midwest well into the late 1800s.



Until they had time to build a small corn crib, early pioneer settlers often made corn shocks and let Mother Nature naturally dry their corn in the field.

A Race Against Time for the First Settlers

When the first white settlers arrived in the Fairbury area in 1830, they faced a long list of urgent tasks. They had to build a cabin, dig a well, clear land, and plant crops—all before winter arrived. Lumber was scarce, tools were limited, and nearly everything had to be done by hand or with the help of a horse.

Constructing a wooden corn crib required time, sawed lumber, and nails, which were not always readily available. As a result, many pioneers relied on a simpler and quicker method to protect their harvested corn.

After the corn matured in the fall, the farmer would cut the stalks near the ground using a knife or a small hand scythe. Instead of immediately removing the ears, he gathered several stalks—usually eight to twelve—and stood them upright in a small bundle called a shock.

The stalk tops were then bent over and tied together. Early settlers rarely had spare string, so they often used corn husks or strips of the stalk itself as natural twine. Later, when manufactured twine became available, it was sometimes used instead.

These shocks formed small teepee-shaped bundles scattered across the field.

Why Corn Shocks Worked

The purpose of shocking corn was simple: air circulation.

By standing the stalks upright and tying them together, the ears of corn were lifted several feet above the ground, usually about 3 feet. This kept the corn away from damp soil, rodents, and standing water. At the same time, wind could pass freely through the bundle, slowly drying the kernels.

Freshly harvested corn in those days often contained 25 to 35 percent moisture, sometimes even higher during a wet fall. If stored too soon in an enclosed space, the corn could mold or spoil.

Leaving the corn in shocks allowed nature to do the drying.

Over several weeks, the open air and autumn winds gradually reduced the moisture content to safer levels—often down to 15-20 percent. That was dry enough for short-term storage or for feeding livestock. The corn might later be moved into a crib for additional drying or long-term storage.

In many cases, the shocks remained standing in the field until winter.

When the farmer needed feed for his animals, he simply walked out to the field, pulled a few stalks from the shock, and removed the ears by hand. Nothing went to waste. The dry stalks were often used as livestock bedding or burned as fuel.

For a pioneer family with limited time and resources, shocking corn was an efficient and practical solution.

The Corn Crib Came Later

As farms became more established, settlers gradually built wooden corn cribs near their homes. These structures had narrow gaps between the boards, allowing air to circulate through the stored corn. Over time, the corn crib replaced shocks as the primary method of drying and storing large quantities of grain.

Still, corn shocks remained a common sight on Midwestern farms for many decades. Even into the early 1900s, fields dotted with rows of shocks were a familiar autumn scene across Illinois.

The Kickapoo Were Farming Corn Long Before Settlers Arrived

Of course, the story of corn in the Fairbury area did not begin with the arrival of white settlers. The Kickapoo people lived in this region long before 1830, and they were skilled farmers who understood the land and its seasons.

Corn was the most important crop in their agriculture, but they rarely planted it alone.

Instead, they practiced a method often called the “Three Sisters” planting system. The three crops were corn, beans, and squash.

These plants were grown together in the same mound of soil, and each one played a specific role.

The corn provided a tall, sturdy stalk that the bean vines could climb. The beans, in turn, helped enrich the soil by adding nitrogen, an essential nutrient for plant growth. Meanwhile, the squash spread across the ground with large leaves that shaded the soil, helping retain moisture and suppress weeds.

This simple but effective system allowed the Kickapoo to produce reliable harvests without modern fertilizers or machinery.

Harvesting and Drying Corn in the Kickapoo Villages

When the corn ripened in late summer or early fall, the Kickapoo harvested the ears by hand, much like the later settlers did.

However, their method of drying and storing corn differed somewhat.

After picking the ears, the women often pulled back the husks and braided them together, forming long strings of corn. These braids were then hung from wooden racks, poles, or the rafters of their lodges. In other cases, the ears were spread out on elevated platforms or drying racks made from poles and woven branches.

Bringing the corn into the village had several advantages.

First, it protected the harvest from animals and sudden weather changes. Second, it allowed the corn to dry gradually in a sheltered environment. Finally, storing food inside the village made it easier to guard and manage during the winter months.

Once fully dried, the kernels could be ground into meal using stone mortars and pestles. Corn was used to make soups, breads, and porridge, and it became a dependable source of food throughout the year.

Two Cultures, One Crop

Although the Kickapoo and the early settlers came from very different backgrounds, they shared a common understanding of corn as a vital food source.

Both groups harvested corn by hand.

Both relied on natural air circulation to dry their crop.

And both developed practical methods suited to their resources and environment.

The Kickapoo used braided ears and drying racks inside their villages. The settlers used shocks in the field and later built wooden corn cribs near their homes. Each method reflected the technology and materials available at the time.

Corn Still Matters Today

Today, corn remains one of the most valuable crops grown in Livingston County and throughout Illinois. The difference lies not in the crop's importance, but in how it is harvested and dried.

Modern farmers use large combines that can harvest hundreds of acres in a single day. Grain is transported to elevators where powerful dryers quickly reduce moisture to safe storage levels—often within a matter of hours.

What once took weeks of drying in the wind can now be done with the push of a button.

Yet the basic goal has not changed in nearly two centuries.

Whether it was the Kickapoo hanging braided ears in their lodges, a pioneer farmer stacking shocks in his field, or a modern grower delivering grain to an elevator, the objective has always been the same:

Protect the harvest, dry the corn, and make sure there is food for the winter.

Corn has been a dependable partner to the people of this region for generations—and it continues to be one of the foundations of life on the Illinois prairie.